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STATE RAIDS ILLEGAL CHEESE VENDORS

Health Hazards of "Bathtub" Cheese Cited

SACRAMENTO-Investigators from the California Department of Food and Agriculture cited two people this week and destroyed 300 pounds of illegally produced soft cheese, mostly Queso Fresco, in the Eastvale community in Riverside County.

The illegal product, sometimes called "Bathtub" cheese, poses a health threat to California consumers because unlicensed manufacturers frequently use raw, unpasteurized milk that can encourage the growth of harmful bacteria. Manufacturers also use bathtubs, home made wooden vats and rusted cheese molds, and they may store the cheese in barns or garages lacking adequate pest control and sanitation. CDFA will test samples from this latest seizure for the presence of bacteria.

"We want to warn people about the dangers of eating illegally produced soft cheese," said CDFA Secretary William (Bill) J. Lyons, Jr. "By identifying illegal operations and publicizing the risks to consumers, we hope to prevent illness or even more tragic consequences."

Listeria and Salmonella are the most common bacteria found in "Bathtub" cheese. While the bacteria cannot be detected by sight, taste or smell, it can cause severe illness to infants, the elderly and those with impaired immune systems. The bacteria may also cause miscarriages, infections to the blood stream, diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramping.

Queso Fresco is a soft white cheese that has a mild, slightly salty flavor. While licensed, safe and wholesome Queso Fresco is available from reputable firms, it is often sold by unlicensed manufacturers at swap meets, flea markets, small neighborhood markets and door-to-door.

CDFA participated on a 54-member task force of investigators from federal, state and local agencies to inspect cheese for sale at multiple locations in the Eastvale-area.

In California, it is a criminal offense to manufacture and sell cheese from an unlicensed facility. Each conviction carries a sentence of up to one year in jail and a maximum fine of \$10,000. To report a suspected illegal cheese manufacturer, call CDFA at (916) 653-3931.